

# AP World History

## Why did Europeans Colonize the World?

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The Industrial Revolution in Western Europe and the United States ushered in an era of imperialism that brought most of the world's land under European political control. Why did the industrializing nations assert their powers in this way? To some extent, the answer seems obvious: They relished the power, wealth, and prestige that apparently came with imperial possessions. They also claimed to welcome the opportunity to serve others. Further, the industrial system that they were building took on a life of its own, requiring ever-increasing sources of raw materials and more markets in which to sell. But why was trade alone not enough? Why did the industrialists feel it was necessary to take political control as well? Were there additional motives behind imperialism? And did the results of imperialism match the aspirations of the imperial rulers?

We cannot answer all these questions fully, but a review article by Patrick Wolfe in *The American Historical Review*, "History and Imperialism: A Century of Theory, from Marx to Postcolonialism," helps us to review and sort out some of the most prominent explanations.

Karl Marx deplored the exploitation of colonialism, but, as a European, he valued some of its contributions. Britain, he emphasized, brought to India a new economic dynamism, with railroads, industrial infrastructure, and communication networks. Ultimately this transformation would lead to capitalism and then socialism. Marx wrote in 1853: "Whatever may have been the crimes of England, she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution" (Marx and Engels, *The First Indian War of Independence 1857-1859*, p. 21).

J.A. Hobson, a British economist writing in 1902, and V.I. Lenin, the leader of the communist revolution in Russia (see Chapter Nineteen), writing in 1916, agreed that the desire to control raw materials and markets drove imperialism. Hobson pointed out that the profits of the imperial system went mostly to the rich. He believed that if

imperialism were ended overseas, a concentration on investment and industry at home would provide greater opportunities to the working classes in Europe. M.N. Roy, a founder of the Communist Party of India, disagreed with Hobson, arguing that the profits of imperialism did provide economic gains to European workers and that they would therefore support the system. The revolt against the imperial, and capitalist, system would have to begin among the workers in the colonies who were more exploited.

Several analysts have tried to grasp the imperial system as a whole, understanding the impact of colonizer and colonized upon one another. Some, like Marx, saw the system introducing valuable modernization into the colonies. Most, like Immanuel Wallerstein and the American economists Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy, argued that the imperial power would always seek to keep the colonies in a position of dependency and underdevelopment. The imperial rulers might introduce some technological innovations, such as railways that were necessary for their trade, but they had no interest in enabling the colonies to become economic and technological rivals. Indeed, one reason for imposing imperial domination was to prevent the colony from taking control of its own economic policies.

Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher, British historians writing in the 1960s, and French philosopher Louis Althusser, writing in the 1970s and 1980s, stressed the need to evaluate imperialism on a case-by-case basis. British imperialism in Egypt, for example, was quite sophisticated and benign compared with the raw cruelty of Belgian imperialism in the Congo. Even within individual colonies, imperialists treated different regions and groups differently, for example incorporating educated urban groups into the administration while treating plantation workers almost like slave labor. Imperial rule also varied considerably depending on the administration in power in the imperial country and also on the local imperial

representatives on the scene. All three scholars eschewed generalizations and emphasized the complexity of the imperial enterprise.

Finally, some of the most recent scholarly analyses of imperialism—often referred to as postcolonial analyses—have stressed the cultural impact of imperialism on both colonized and colonizer. Imperial rulers usually drew a sense of pride from their conquest and exalted their own culture for possessing colonies. Colonized peoples, on the other hand, often suffered a sense of inferiority.

They had to reexamine their historic cultural traditions and identities in light of the fact that they had been conquered by foreigners. The post-colonial literature that analyzes this cultural confrontation has expanded rapidly, with contributions by literary critics such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Indeed, as industrialization has brought peoples of the world into ever closer contact, and political philosophies have collided with one another, questions of personal and group identity have increased everywhere.

- Among the scholars who argue that economics is the main force behind imperialism, there are differences of opinion. What are these differences? Which point of view seems most persuasive to you?
- Some scholars have argued that political gain has been the main force behind imperialism. What evidence do you see to support this viewpoint?
- Many contemporary scholars argue that the colonizing countries have been influenced by colonialism culturally just as much as the colonized have been. What examples of this influence can you cite?